

The proper role of professional military advice in contemporary uses of force

Martin Cook, *Parameters*, Winter 2002-03, 21-33.

Key concepts

- Discusses the challenge of providing professional military advice in terms of two competing considerations: (1) to assure that the of trained military professionals is solicited and heard; and (2) to guard against the military making claims to expertise that properly lies beyond its professional jurisdiction and that encroaches on political expertise and authority.
- In the process of the discussion, the paper raises important issues regarding (1) an inherent professional bias within the military that predisposes it to advise force intervention at a particular level (consistent with its professional self-image of 'fighting' and 'the warrior'); and (2) the difficulty that contemporary military professionals have in recognising and coming to grips with the ethical issues associated with proportional use of force.

Main points

- Argues that the military has a **cultural bias** that shapes the kind of advice that it will give in regard to any strategic issue. At its extreme, the military has a significant resistance to embracing Operations-Other-Than-War missions in general. The framing of the military's purpose in terms of 'fighting' has a profound effect on force structure, training, career structures, etc. However, the emerging international order may not bear much resemblance to that environment in the foreseeable future. If this is the case, the military will need to rethink its self understanding and its views of its purposes, in order to render professional military advice effectively to political leaders contemplating such missions.
- This leads the military to a certain **values bias**, in terms of favouring military interventions that are sufficiently forceful to achieve the objectives of force safety and reaching military objectives, even at the risk of collateral damage/civilian casualties.
- 'Ethically, the drive to protect one's own forces at all costs can lead military commanders to disregard entirely the ethical requirements to show due regard to the lives of the adversary, both military and civilian... Personal experience in teaching ethics in warfare to senior military officers indicates that it is extremely difficult in the contemporary environment to get them to grant even the importance of the issue... The military's cultural expectation that overwhelming force will be used in all circumstances to ensure the maximum safety of one's own forces seriously threatens due regard to considerations of proportionality, military necessity, and discrimination in practice.'
- However, the professional soldier must also deal with a quandary in this respect. An intervention that is so minimal that it poses no risks to locals may be functionally useless, in that it may not meet its political and military objectives.
- All this highlights the complexity of 'the management of violence' in the contemporary context. To be effective managers of violence, 'military professionals must fully understand the complexity of the environment in which they do that managing. This includes a full recognition of the ethical, political, and diplomatic constraints that bear upon their decisions... It requires the maturity of judgement to grasp that, while their world would be neater if political leaders would just define the mission and then get out of the way, that will almost never be the world in which they live and meet their professional obligations.'
- Another implication is the need for a military institution to critically examine the way that it frames its fundamental purpose, and to recognise the inherent implications flowing from this. Points out that, in any case, from a longer view of American history, 'this particular way of conceiving the nature and purpose of military forces is not typical'.